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A Sociological Study of Post Reform Agrarian Relations: Farmer–Worker Cooperation and Conflict in Kuttanad, Kerala

Mohan Mathew [1*], Dr. Leela P. U [2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Sociology & Centre for Research, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, Kerala

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology & Centre for Research, St.Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, Kerala

**Corresponding Author: Mohan Mathew (frmohanm@sbcollege.ac.in)*

Abstract

The article explores how the everyday agrarian relations of cooperation and conflict are redefined in the post reform agrarian Kerala, Kuttanad, due to precarity. It examines the life history, semi structured interviews and focus group discussions with farmers, labourers, migrants and local leaders using Charmaz constructivist grounded theory in order to trace the dynamic tenure, labour regimes, mechanisation and procurement practices. The results indicate that land reform restructured holdings and replaced hereditary tenancy by short leases, youth exit, women withdrawal and MGNREGA have reorganized labour supply and increased reliance on migrant crews and machines. The distribution of harvesters, pumps, committees and paddy procurements, PRS related payment delays and so on, provide choke points with the concentration of power and tension. The unions, padasekhara samithi and brokers mediate this dynamic in different ways resulting in a reproductive cycle of agrarian strain whereby some collaboration has to exist to ensure paddy is grown but is repeatedly destroyed by risk, debt and institutional frictions.

Keywords*: Agrarian relations, Farmer–worker dynamics, Land reform, Labour regimes, Migrant labour, Paddy procurement.*

1. Introduction

Kerala is generally famous post reform as being redistributive in land laws, high levels of social development, and having a long record of left politics, but agrarian relations on the ground are still characterized by endemic tension, precarity, and daily bargaining. An example of this paradox is Kuttanad, a low-lying paddy field of Alappuzha and neighbouring districts, in which land redistribution has produced a vast mass of smallholders, restructured by emerging labour market, mechanisation and state procurement regimes, to formulate how farmers and workers associate and conflict in daily agriculture.

This article presents a sociological work on post reform agrarian relations within Kuttanad in Kerala on the cooperation and conflict between farmers and workers in a transformed farming regime. It follows the development of a form of reproductive circuit of agrarian strain by the combination of tenure change, labour transitions, mechanisation, and procurement systems to create what is arguably known as a reproductive circuit of agrarian strain through drawing on the constructivist grounded theory analysis of life history interviews, focus group data and integrative memos that are already being generated in the field. The main thesis here is that land reform did not merely dissolve agrarian hierarchy, but rather diverted power

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and dependency via new mediating coordinators like leases, machines, committees, mills, and payment systems now to mediate in the manner in which farmers and workers interact and conflict.

2. Literature review

A number of relevant strands can be offered with sociological and agrarian studies of Kerala and India.

Kerala: land reforms and agrarian relations

Kerala's post-reform agrarian relations literature shows that land reforms fundamentally weakened the old janmi–kudiyan order but produced a differentiated smallholding structure in which former tenants, small owners and residual landlords negotiate wages, leases and credit under new market and state constraints, rather than in a simple egalitarian peasant landscape (Herring, 1983). Studies of Kuttanad and other rice regions emphasise that fixity of tenure, land ceilings and the conferment of ownership did reduce overt feudal dependence, yet they also generated fragmented holdings, tenancy evasion and complex lease arrangements that sustain everyday bargaining and conflict over costs, risk and surplus. This scholarship highlights how post-reform Kerala combines high social development and strong land rights with persistent agrarian precarity, expressed in short-term tenancies, disputes over bund maintenance and water control, and continued struggles over the distribution of productivity gains.

Agrarian change, left movement and labour politics

Left agrarian movements and labour politics in Kerala are widely credited with transforming the balance of power in the countryside, as militant agricultural labour struggles, especially in regions like Kuttanad, forced recognition of minimum wages, collective bargaining and institutional mechanisms for resolving disputes (Prakash Pillai, 2024). Analyses of the Left in Kerala show how peasant and worker mobilisations, supported by communist parties, underpinned tenancy abolition, the institutionalisation of labour rights, and the construction of a policy regime that links agrarian questions to broader welfare and pension arrangements for farm workers. Yet this literature also notes that, after the high tide of mobilisation, labour politics became increasingly mediated through tripartite boards, local committees and party-affiliated unions, creating new forms of brokerage and uneven enforcement that shape contemporary farmer–worker cooperation and conflict.

Rural wages, labour markets and MGNREGA

Research on rural wages, labour markets and MGNREGA in Kerala and other states finds that public employment guarantees have tightened agricultural labour supply, contributed to higher rural wages and altered the terms on which farmers access labour, especially during peak seasons (Reddy & Shah, 2011). Micro-studies and evaluations report that MGNREGA gives workers, particularly women and marginalised groups, a fallback option that improves their bargaining power, while farmers complain about labour scarcity, rising wage bills and difficulties in synchronising operations within short paddy windows. At the same time, scholars identify a dual effect: although MGNREGA wages are often below private agricultural wages in Kerala, the scheme's rights-based character and regular payment schedules reshape expectations of work conditions and contribute to a reorganisation of agrarian relations around more contractual, less deferential forms of labour.

Mechanisation, migrant workforce and gendered working patterns.

Studies on mechanisation, migrant workforce and gendered work patterns in Kerala show that the spread of machines in paddy cultivation, alongside the influx of inter-state migrant labour, has both raised labour productivity and undermined local women's traditional roles in tasks such as transplanting and harvesting (Agarwal, 2012). Empirical work from Palakkad and other rice-growing districts documents how mechanised transplanting and combine harvesters displace manual operations, while migrant male crews

increasingly take over remaining labour-intensive jobs, reinforcing processes of "masculinisation" of agriculture and depressing local female work participation. This literature argues that gendered segmentation and casualisation are reconfigured rather than abolished: women lose access to key wage opportunities, depend more on public schemes like MGNREGA, and face new vulnerabilities in a labour market structured by contractors, custom-hiring centres and state subsidies for machines.

Kuttanad, environmental intervention, and agrarian misery.

Environmental interventions and agrarian misery in Kuttanad have been analysed through the lens of wetland transformation, Green Revolution technologies and climate risk, with scholars documenting how large-scale hydraulic projects and chemical-intensive farming have turned a once celebrated "rice bowl" into a zone of ecological and livelihood crisis (M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 2007). Case studies describe waterlogging, pollution, biodiversity loss and recurrent floods that destroy crops and erode farm profitability, prompting out-migration, indebtedness and a gradual exit of better-off cultivators, even as small and marginal farmers remain trapped in risky paddy cultivation. Policy-oriented reports on Kuttanad argue for special agricultural zones, climate-resilient farming, improved dewatering and storage, and institutional innovations to address agrarian distress, highlighting how environmental degradation and governance failures intersect with class and caste to reproduce agrarian misery.

All these five strands demonstrate that there is a need to have a grounded, processual analysis of post reform agrarian relations that hold together land reforms, labour markets, mechanisation, ecological governance, and everyday sociological dynamics in a particular region such as Kuttanad.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and data collection

The article relies on a constructivist grounded theory (GT) approach in the vein of Charmaz based on already gathered rich qualitative material in Kuttanad. The dataset comprises Life history and semi structured interviews with farmers and tenants as well as agricultural labourers and migrant workers and community leaders and experts of various caste and faith groups of Kuttanad. Raw data quotations, initial gerund codes, focused categories, and analytic memos, made up into detailed Charmaz style GT tables of individual participants (e.g. Sabu Champakulam, Murali, Shylaja, Thankappan, Kaimal, Anil). Thematic focus group discussions on migration, floods, infrastructure and livelihood change in Kuttanad are to be held. Integrative memos of mediating mechanisms within cases to a previous research question about cooperation, conflict, and hierarchy. Sampling was purposive and maximum variation: Interviews include small and medium farmers, former tenants, women farmers, agricultural labourers, migrant workers, union and committee leaders, and experts in relation to research and policy on Kuttanad. The data were collected in Malayalam and were audio recorded where feasible and transcribed and translated to be analyzed later with due attention to terms used by the emics like janmi kudiyan, patasekara, puncha and local varieties of paddy.

3.2 Data analysis process

The analysis was done in the iterative process of Charmaz:

Open coding: Gerund-based line by line coding of interview extracts (e.g. "narrating shifts from janmi-kudiyan to leases), queueing for machines, competing with public job schemes), giving rise to a high density of first codes.

Focused coding: Clustering these codes into higher order categories like anchored, e.g. in terms of age, occupation, education, experience, gender, race/ethnicity, size, etc.; as Transparent Tenure Post Reform, Labor Substitution and Youth Exit, Teenocracy Dependence, Discounting, Collective Mediation, Power-Memo to Cooperation, Memo to Conflict, Memo to Hierarchy.

Axial coding: Reconstruction of causal and conditional relationships between categories - how land reforms, labour market change, mechanisation and state procurement systems mediate the patterns of interaction between farmers and workers.

Theoretical coding: The synthesis of the highlighted categories into a central process of explanation as denoted here as coordinating under post reform precarity, at the article level, the reproductive circuit of agrarian strain.

Cross interview, caste rank and community rank and time (pre reform landlordism, early post reform period, contemporary mechanised regime) were compared constantly to narrow categories and not impose a priori class or caste patterns.

4. Findings: the reproductive circuit of agrarian strain

4.1 Open and focused coding: emergent categories

An open coding led to a group of common themes: telling the end of janmi-kudiyan, rotating on short leases, finding local labour, depending on Bengali crews, queuing to harvesters, bemoaning wage differentials, arguing with mill cuts, waiting to get PRS payments. These were summarized as shown below:

Transactional Tenure post Land Reform: Short term leasing, fragmentation of holdings, and complicated inheritance and making cooperation contingent and disputes over who benefits by maintaining bunds and taking the risk has been eroded by the new system as respondents elaborate.

- State land-use data indicate that the proportion of paddy in total cropped land has declined drastically over decades, where total paddy area is estimated at approximately 1.96 lakh ha in 2021 22 (7.6-7.8% of total cropped land) and area has decreased by 77 per cent compared with the 1970s.
- In within this, punja/wetland paddy is concentrated in Palakkad, Alappuzha and Thrissur, and area still shrinks, which means fragmentation and abandonment of paddy cultivation in line with short-lease and weak tenure of post janmi.
- According to the Economic Review, cash crops (rubber, coconut, plantation crops) currently constitute almost two-thirds of cropped area with rice contributing a minor portion with the implication that seasonal tenancy/lease is now being used by many of these landowners to keep paddy running and not the traditional landlord-tenant relationship.

Reorganised Labour Regimes: Women are less frequently involved and resort to MGNREGA and other work, youth to school, migration and paid labour, migrant labour aboard during sowing, weeding, and harvesting.

- The percentage of workers in agriculture in Kerala has sharply declined; According to the analysis of NSS in official reports only about one-third of the workers were engaged in agriculture, fishing and forestry in the mid-2000s and this has fallen since then.
- The economic Review information stresses on the service-based economy (more than 60 per cent of the GSVA is Service based) and high rates of non-farm business growth, that point to the migration and wage work of the younger and better-educated rural populations out of agriculture.
- Studies in state publications on MGNREGA and wages indicate that MGNREGA has constrained farm labour supply, increased the wages and mechanisation in rural areas, with labour days to hectare in paddy decreasing, and the number of hours spent on machines growing.

Technocratic Dependence: It is now also important as machines, pumps and bundle decisions that are now important coordinators, farmers decide how to queue to Tamil Nadu harvesters, pumping contracts will be auctioned and committees decide the release of water, which dictate labour demand and cooperation.

- State agricultural statistics indicate that paddy currently occupies a minor portion of the cropped area, but the productivity has increased to approximately 2.9 t/ha, which is better than it was 10 years ago, according to the Review which attributes this to some input intensification and mechanisation.
- Crop reports and Economic Review chapters point at the growing use of pump sets, mechanised transplanting, and combine harvesters, and government mechanisation schemes and custom-hiring centres are exactly in paddy-growing areas.
- Irrigation statistics indicate the presence of net irrigated area of approximately 4-4.2 lakh ha with canals and wells being the primary sources of water and emphasize that the water-release timing and local command committees should be used to arrange the cultivation activities.

Procurement and Payment Frictions: the quality reduction, deduction of 6-10 kg/quintal and late PRS payments of one-three months with Millers transfer conflict of the field to the procurement and banking interfaces, and thus, it is difficult to pay wages on time.

- It is agreeable in Economic Review and press-reported official briefings that paddy procurement is based on PRS (paddy receipt sheets) which are utilized by farmers to obtain bank loans until sums which are received in MSP funds are disbursed.
- However, state-level data of 2022 23 demonstrates an improvement in rice production, but also provides fiscal limitations and central delays in MSP payments, which have led to backlogs in procurement payments; more than 7.3 lakh tonnes were purchased in a single season, hundreds of crores are still outstanding and tens of thousands of farmers remain unpaid fully.
- The fact that official concern exists about the CIBIL score of farmers and that the bank consortia or the Kerala Bank-based scheme would be necessary to secure that they could get paid on time proves that the field conflict is being transferred onto procurement, banking interfaces and credit relations.

Collective Mediation and its Recession: There are accounts of how patasekara samithis, unions and community organisations have negotiated water, machines and wages, and other on how they have also been undermined or captured, and led to the use of more brokers and individually bargained agreements.

- The Economic Review describes the agrarian development of Kerala as heavily mediated by cooperatives, local governments and sectoral committees, and has more than 16,000 cooperatives and major functions of PACS, primary co-ops, and farmer collectives in procurement and supply of inputs.
- In farming and irrigation, the Review also identifies water user associations at local level, padasekharam schemes and participatory infrastructure planning though at the same time, it refers to fiscal constraints, institutional overloading and the necessity to re-establish cooperative and local-state capacity.
- Paddy procurement is more formally processed by Supplyco, cooperative mills and banks, but in recent years payment crises have occasioned ad hoc procedures (bank consortia, alternative disbursal mechanisms), which has in effect increased the influence of brokers, bank managers and individual negotiations which previously had been more orchestrated by unions and samithis.

The above categories already signify that, farmer-worker cooperation is being restructured, rather than merely diffused, in the post reform agrarian conditions. These elements triangulate category of “collective mediation and its recession”: official narratives emphasise institutional orchestration, but the very need for new schemes, ad hoc financial fixes and reforms implies that older forms of collective regulation (padasekhara samithis, unions, community organisations) are uneven, contested or weakened, opening space for brokerage and individual bargaining.

4.2 Axial coding: the causal model

The categories are linked in a causal and conditional model by means ofaxial coding.

To start with, land reforms and tenancy reform established a foundation of smallholders and former tenants, but at the same time disaggregated land and encouraged the short, rotating leases over hereditary tenancy. This transactional tenure makes less incentive to cooperative relations in the long term between landowners and cultivators as well as conflicts arise between them whenever yields or prices fall, or bund fail since risk sharing is not specified.

Second, education, migration and MGNREGA have changed the labour regimes. Young people are urged to go out into technical, nursing, and Gulf jobs, and women take the better of assured wage scheme jobs to uncertain paddy labour. This is manifested in farmers as a sense of scarcity and the resort to migrating crews and machines and has restructured cooperation in terms of contracts, daily wages and brokers instead of kin and neighbourly reciprocity.

Thirdly, reliance on harvesters, pumps, and bunds by the technocrats causes power and friction choke points. The order of work is determined by operators and committees, any failure or breakdown of the machine may place the farmers and workers in conflict on which one should suffer the losses of rain or flood damage. These choices overlap with caste and community systems of domination of committees and water systems.

Fourth, there is the increase in tensions due to procurement and payment frictions. Farmers describe good cuts at mills and long delays in payment by PRS, and struggle to pay labourers, servicing loans, and even to plan the next season. Workers, on their part, receive irregular wages and could choose MGNREGA or non farm employment, perpetrating the labour shortage cycle.

Lastly, these conflicts are mediated and not exterminated by the variable presence of collective bodies. Where unions and committees exist and are active, coordinating wages, water and machines is done through unions; where they fail or disintegrate, the vacuum is occupied by brokers, creditors who tend to reproduce hierarchy and the daily subordination.

4.3 Theoretical coding: the core category

The relations are synthesised in a core category with the help of theoretical coding:

Routed to labour, machine, and payment choke points Coordinating under post reform precarity: farmer worker relations.

This fundamental type defines the combination of land reforms, labour market changes, mechanisation, and procurement systems to end up creating a mode of cooperation between farmers and workers needed to maintain paddy farming, but now under the mediation of a few coordinators (leases, brokers, machines, committees, mills, PRS) who shape the potential to cooperate, when, and on what terms.

4.4 Theoretical propositions

- Based on this model, the analysis comes up with a number of grounded propositions:
- P1: On a replacement of hereditary tenancy with short, rotating leases, collaboration between the landowners and cultivators becomes delicate and is likely to fail in case of price or yield shock since accountability of bund maintenance and risk-taking is poorly institutionalised.
- P2: Youth exit, women withdrawal and MGNRGA create labour shortage compelling farmers to hire migrant crews and machines and transitioning cooperation, based on kin reciprocity, to brokered wage contracts and heightening daily conflict over skill, productivity and pay.
- P3: New hierarchies are established when the operators and committees concentrate control over machines and water infrastructures; timing and charge struggles at these bottlenecks reorganize farmer-worker relationships and in some cases, oppose farmers in various localities against each other.

- P4: Opaque evaluation at mills and payments late on PRS results in making conflict an element of field relations and place-based management more, nonetheless, the relational practices of trust, wage payments and credit-creditor dependence.
- P5: Gradually, the more the wages, patasekara committees, and water are mediated by the union, the more cooperative forms and collective voice are robust; and conversely, the more they retreat, the more everyday hierarchy is centralized around brokers, operators and officials and low level conflict is a regular occurrence.

5. Theoretical synthesis: the reproductive circuit

According to Kuttanad case, there is a more inclusive substantive theory of a reproductive circuit of agrarian strain in a post reform environment. The land reforms and ecological interventions brought a layer of small holders and infrastructural aids that enabled the large scale paddy production but further changes in labour, technology and state procurement has generated a circuit pattern of strain being reproduced instead of being resolved.

In this circuit:

1. Structural factors like fragmented tenure, labour exit, ecological risk and procurement regimes restrict farmer-worker options and increase the risk and cost of cultivating.

2. Mediating coordinators- leases, migrant labour brokers, machines, committees, mills, and PRS come into the spotlight of organising cooperation and are locations whereby hierarchy and conflict are made and normalised.

3. Adaptive options - borrowing, increasing mechanisation, switching to scheme work, seasonal migration and partial exodus out of the farming sector contribute to the survival of households but re-enter the labour shortage, debt, and dependence loop.

This theoretical synthesis echoes broader arguments of agrarian distress and agrarian resilience in Kerala, whether in the context of wider discussions, but it bases it in a fine grained sociological explanation of how farmers and workers practice a cooperation and conflict in their everyday practice.

Conclusion

This post reform agrarian relation grounded theory study of Kuttanad reveals that post reform agrarian relations in Kerala are not merely emancipatory or merely exploitative, but are typified by a complicated pattern of mediated cooperation within the conditions of precarity. The reorganisation of the ownership and infrastructure through land reforms and ecological initiatives gave way to a different form of the organisation of farmer-worker relations, which is increasingly based on the labour brokers, machines, committees, mills and payment systems that allow and restrict the cooperatives action.

The article makes a contribution to the sociological discourse on agrarian change in that it:

- The expansion of land reform literature in Kerala to a meso level, mechanism-based description of the interaction of tenancy, labour and procurement within a particular wetland agro ecosystem.
- Connecting national debate on MGNREGA, mechanisation, and migrant labour to the micro politics of cooperation and conflict in a high wage, high social development region.
- Suggesting the idea of a reproductive circuit of agrarian strain that reproduces dependence and precarity, through creative responses to survive in a cost-price and institutionally constrained situation itself.
- In policy terms, the results indicate that maintaining the type of farmer-worker collaboration in Kuttanad would not only necessitate ecological and infrastructural interventions, but also the changes in the leasing practice, control over machines and water, transparency in purchase and competent collective institutions that would avert conflicts in a more egalitarian manner.

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